



News Release

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Death rate drops 23 percent for prescription pain med overdoses

Several key initiatives begin to make a difference

OLYMPIA — Fewer people in Washington died from prescription pain medication overdoses from 2008 to 2011, after an eightfold increase in deaths in the decade before. The overdose death rate dropped 23 percent, and the number of deaths dropped from 512 in 2008 to 407 in 2011.

Most pain medications that require a prescription contain drugs known as opiates or opioids. These drugs have effects like opium or morphine, and can be addictive. In addition to morphine, opiates include codeine, oxycodone (brand names OxyContin, Percocet and others), meperidine (Demerol), and hydrocodone (brand names include Vicodin and Lortab). Prescriptions for these medications have increased dramatically since the late 1990s —misuse and abuse has also increased dramatically. In the past two years, the Department of Health created new prevention tools to help health care providers and consumers: pain management rules for health care providers and the Prescription Monitoring Program.

“We’re not out of the woods yet,” said State Health Officer Dr. Maxine Hayes. “While it’s encouraging that deaths have dropped, the death rate in 2011 was six times higher than in 1998. Health care providers play a critical role in prescribing medications and helping patients manage pain safely. Prescription pain medications are powerful drugs and must be handled carefully.”

New pain management rules for health care providers who prescribe pain medication include guidance for using opiate-based medications to manage chronic, non-cancer pain. These rules encourage practitioners to become better educated for safe and effective use of these drugs. Rules became effective July 1, 2011 for osteopathic physicians and osteopathic physician assistants, advanced registered nurse practitioners, dentists, and podiatrists. They became effective for physicians and physician assistants on January 2, 2012.

The new Prescription Monitoring Program is a secure online database that allows prescribers to see all of the prescriptions for controlled substances that their patients are receiving. Health care providers were offered access to the system in January 2012. The prescriber can look for duplicate prescriptions, misuse, drug interactions, and other concerns. In less than a year, 22 percent of eligible prescribers had registered to use the system.

Patients taking these medications should keep them in a safe place so others can't get to them, and never share their medicine with others. Always follow the directions and consult with your doctor or pharmacist if you have questions or concerns. Taking these powerful drugs with alcohol, other prescription or illegal drugs can be dangerous — and deadly.

Unused or expired prescription medications should be disposed of properly. Several [drug take-back programs](#) exist across the state, including pharmacies, police and fire departments, and [locations are easy to find](#) in your community.

The [Good Samaritan Law allows immunity](#) from criminal charges for anyone who is either experiencing an overdose or witnessing one and reports it. Call 9-1-1 to get care as quickly as possible. Our [Take as Directed](#) webpage has community resources and publications to help people with this serious issue.

The [Department of Health website](#) (doh.wa.gov) is your source for *a healthy dose of information*. Also, [find us on Facebook](#) and [follow us on Twitter](#).

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